The history of bioethics begins during the decade of the 1960s when savants began to converse with each other about the dangerous and difficult aspects of advances in the biomedical sciences. The history of bioethics as a discipline may open with a 1973 article by Dan Callahan, founder and director of the Institute for Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences (now the Hastings Center) entitled “Bioethics as a Discipline.” Callahan wrote, “bioethics is not yet a full discipline . . . (it lacks) general acceptance, disciplinary standards, criteria of excellence and clear pedagogical and evaluative norms” (p. 68). This very lack, he suggested, offered bioethics an unprecedented opportunity to define itself. It could move toward “definition of issues, methodological strategies and procedures for decision-making.” In defining issues, bioethics would need “the rigor of the unfettered imagination,” the ability to envision alternatives, to get into people’s ethical agonies (p. 71). In developing methodological strategies, bioethics must use the traditional modes of philosophical analysis -- logic, consistency, careful use of terms, seeking rational justifications – supplemented by sensitivity to feelings and emotions as well as to the political and social influences on behaviors. Finally, the discipline must provide procedures “to reach reasonably specific, clear decisions...in the circumstances of medicine and science.” Callahan concluded: “The discipline of bioethics should be so designed, and its practitioners so trained, that it will directly – at whatever cost to disciplinary elegance – serve those physicians and biologists whose positions demand that they make the practical decisions” (p. 72). This sort of discipline, according to Callahan, requires a knowledge of the sociology of the profession and of health care, scientific training, historical knowledge of regnant value theories, facility with methods of ethical analysis common in the philosophical and theological communities, and their limitations when applied to cases – an “impossible list of demands,” admitted Callahan, but approachable by “a continuing, tension-ridden dialectic . . . kept alive by a continued exposure to specific cases in all their human dimensions” (p. 73).

This present article will begin with a rough definition of “discipline,” and trace the elements of that rough definition through the earliest days of bioethical discourse, that is, through the initial attempts of philosophers.
theologians and a few other scholars during the 1970s, to define and analyze the moral issues of the biomedical sciences and medical practice. The article will then examine a peculiar feature of this discussion, which will be called “the invention of argument,” and suggest how that feature shaped the disciplinary character of bioethics. A final section will speculate on the future directions of bioethics as a discipline.

I. DEFINITION OF A DISCIPLINE

Callahan does not define “discipline” but does delineate the major features that characterize a discipline: “definition of issues, methodological strategies and procedures for decision-making.” The noun “discipline,” the Oxford English Dictionary informs us, means “a branch of instruction or learning”; the verbal form of the same word means “to bring under control.” The Latin word from which both are derived means “the act of teaching or imparting knowledge” and a “discipulus” is a student. An act of teaching requires that the mind of the student be brought under control and that the information also be under control. The OED cites a 1650 text, “Objective disciplines be principally four, Theologie, Jurisprudence, Medicine, Philosophy.” So by that date, a “discipline” organized segments of information into compartments that were arranged in an order suited to teaching learners. Those compartments had to be comprised of a certain subject-matter and a method for organizing it. Those “objective disciplines” came into being because of the “rage for order” that inspired the medieval scholastics, the renaissance classicists and enlightenment rationalists: definition, distinction, classification, logical exposition created the compartments into which diffuse information that they had inherited from the minds of the past could be separated and parcelled out in the teachable packages of lectures and treatises. Their constructions have existed even to our academic times, with extensive modifications and many additions.

The classical concept of a discipline, however, has become increasingly difficult to maintain. In the modern university, the clear lines of many classical disciplines have diffused into mosaics: even the most definitive ones, such as mathematics and physics, are complex collections of sub-disciplines with quite diverse theories, methods and even definitions of the field. It is not uncommon that professors within the same department, and nominally within the same discipline, have very little common language or few common concepts. Clear subject matters have fragmented into parts that often bear but a nominal relation to the whole: Euclidean geometers and Mobius strip topologists may dwell in the same department but have little to